

VZCZCXRO3005  
PP RUEHBC RUEHDBU RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK RUEHLH RUEHPW RUEHROV  
DE RUEHRH #8799 3121014  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 081014Z NOV 06  
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3284  
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0453  
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH PRIORITY 7924  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEAWJA/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L RIYADH 008799

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPT PLEASE PASS TO NEA/I; NEA/ARP FOR BSHUKAN/SWALKER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/07/2016  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [IZ](#) [SA](#)  
SUBJECT: SAUDI PUBLIC REACTION TO SADDAM HUSSEIN'S  
SENTENCING MIXED

REF: RIYADH 6940

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Michael Gfoeller for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Saudi public reaction to the November 5 sentencing to death of Saddam Hussein has been mixed. While there are those who question the legality of Hussein's trial and the credibility of the proceedings, others agree with the verdict and sentencing. At the same time, some Saudis have expressed concern that Saddam's sentencing will result in an upswing of violence, while others suggest that it will not significantly impact the violence -- at least not in the long term. There is, however, broad consensus that the timing of the verdict was designed to coincide with the November 7 midterm elections. As one local Saudi contact put it, "President Bush needed this to offset negative U.S. public reaction to all the losses in Iraq."

¶2. (U) Both the English and Arabic press ran numerous articles on November 6 and 7 regarding the verdict in Saddam's trial. The English language Saudi Gazette ran on November 6 an article quoting the opinions of several Saudi political analysts. Khaled al-Habbas, who teaches international political science at King Abdul Aziz University, told the Gazette that the trial was "politicized and the outcome known." He claimed that the sentence was unlawful, in part he claimed, because the court was formed "in accordance with the wishes of American officials." Al-Habbas pointed to the fact that Hussein's guards were Americans, his lawyers repeatedly fired and the judges changed several times as further evidence that "the judgment was biased." Al-Habbas further claimed that the violence in Iraq is aimed at the "occupation," not Saddam or his trial. Analyst Ali al-Harabi questioned the competence of the judges and suggested that Arab tribes would seek revenge for Hussein's execution.

¶3. (C) There are many Saudis, however, who feel that justice was served by the verdict in Hussein's trial. A Saudi businessman told PolOff on September 7 that Saddam "got what he deserved," claiming that the majority of "educated" Saudis have the same opinion. One local Saudi contact even claimed that the sentence was not harsh enough. Another contact said there are many Iraqis who continue to suffer as a result of Hussein's actions, suggesting that the better alternative would be life imprisonment. One local contact said that, while he feels the verdict is fair, it is a mistake to execute Hussein. He claimed it would only result in disaster

for Iraq because it would further increase the violence by providing the insurgents with yet another excuse. Executing Hussein would only serve to give him "hero" status, he argued.

14. (C) COMMENT: It is not surprising that there has been mixed -- albeit somewhat cautious -- reaction by the Saudi public to Saddam Hussein's sentencing. Saudi public reaction very much reflects how the rest of the international community has responded to the news. What is important to note, however, is that there has been no official comment to date by SAG officials. Despite its self-proclaimed role as the nexus for regional "Arabism," as well as its vested interest in what happens in Iraq, Saudi officials have thus far refrained from public commentary on the Saddam verdict. While there is certainly an element of Arabic unity at play -- the SAG continues its efforts to be a regional mediator -- it is also likely that the SAG learned a hard lesson with the Israeli/Lebanon crisis. The Government took a strong position that resulted in significant public backlash (reftel). With a public that is already critical of SAG support of unpopular U.S. policies, the SAG's silence about Hussein's sentencing should come as no surprise. END COMMENT.

OBERWETTER